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ABSTRACT

Because many parents are beginning to recognize the need for improvement in family communication, a lecture-forum program presented in the South Louisiana area encompasses the skill of listening to children. Defining communication as any behavior that carries a message that is perceived by someone else, the program explores the difference between verbal and nonverbal communication and emphasizes the importance of nonverbal communication. The first major area, the discussion of listening, covers possible reasons why parents listen poorly, such as making up their minds in advance or interrupting. The presentation then moves to suggestions for improving listening habits, including looking at children when they are speaking and learning to read nonverbal signals. When time permits, small groups discuss topics, using the Rogerian Technique. If the groups are interacting well, they may illustrate varying levels of empathy through role-playing situations involving a child who has been caught lying, or a teenager who has broken up with a steady date. The program then administers a listening survey to help parents survey their own habits once those habits have been discussed. This survey can also be used as a point of discussion in a small group. The presentation can be condensed to 30 minutes or expanded to a 3-hour workshop. Evaluations of the workshop format have been consistently high. (The listening survey and a list of workshop objectives are appended.) (HTH)

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TEACHING LISTENING SKILLS FOR PARENTS

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"I was a wonderful parent before I had children. I was an expert on why everyone else was having problems with theirs. Then I had three of my own." (Faber and Mazlish, 1980) Thus begins the book entitled How to Talk So Kids will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk, one of the many volumes that have been produced in the field of family communication. These books, plus the parenting centers that are emerging across the country, attest to the growing interest in an area of communication which, more than any other, has a lasting effect upon our society. Children learn their communication habits from their parents and/or others with whom they may associate; and the habits they learn will ultimately influence their school years, their social lives, their marriages, their jobs, and finally the children to whom they may become parents. (Wood, 1976) Thus the climate of our entire society is determined by the communication habits handed down from one generation to the next.

The eminent psychologist Lee Salk notes that "a happy home, the source of a happy child, is simply a place 'where people talk to one another, listen to one another, where they're important in one another's lives. No matter how busy they are, there should be a real concern for each other.' And even more, he says, 'children need to feel that they come first in the lives of their parents. When children feel that they're simply hanging around and just get a little

bit of leftover time and attention, they become alienated from the family. They seek surrogate families. They become their own family.'" (Woelfle, 1981)

If Salk's philosophy holds true, there is room for much improvement in family communication in our society. Because many parents are beginning to recognize this need, communication specialists are finding fertile fields for workshops in parent/child communication.

One of the lecture/forum programs which I successfully presented in the South Louisiana area for the last three years encompasses the skill of listening to children. This program has been well-received by various school groups of parents and teachers and by parenting groups under the auspices of The Family Tree, an organization established by the Junior League of Lafayette, Louisiana. This paper will review the information and methods used to present this workshop.

Because most parents and many teachers have never thought about the definition of "communication" or about the variables which constitute the process, I find those two items to be a good starting point. Communication is defined as "any behavior that carries a message which is perceived by someone else." (Wahlroos, 1974) The communication model which is employed is a simple one used by Zannes and Goldhaber in their text Stand Up, Speak Out. The difference between verbal and nonverbal communication is explored with emphasis

on the importance of the nonverbal. These basic concepts provide the groundwork.

Moving next to a discussion of the importance of oral communication to our lives both socially and economically, the presentation employs the statistics about the time we spend in communication and the way that time is distributed among reading, writing, speaking and listening; a bar graph is used to graphically illustrate this point. (Wolven and Coakley, 1982)

Although no separate discussion of sending messages is included in this workshop, numerous references to that process are made in the course of the discussions.

The first major point explored in the discussion of listening is "As parents we listen poorly for many reasons." The reasons discussed are as follow:

1. We're preoccupied and don't pay attention.
2. We make up our minds in advance, waiting to say "no".
3. We're angry at the child.
4. We let words upset us.
5. The story or explanation is too long.
6. We listen for bits and peices of information.
7. We jump to conclusions.
8. We interrupt.
9. We engage in selective perception.
10. We misunderstand because words have different meanings for different people.

For some years now I have been collecting cartoons with reference to communication in general and listening in particular.

Some of the strips which consistently address these subjects are the "The Born Loser," "Peanuts," "Winthrop," "Andy Capp," and "Blondie." The cartoons are used to provide humor and to make memorable points in the presentation. It also serves the function of helping parents to see themselves in action!

After a discussion of the detrimental habits that parents have acquired the presentation moves into point two, "There are ways to improve our listening habits." The following suggestions are given with examples provided that help to specify them:

1. Realize that listening takes real effort.
2. Look at the child when s/he is speaking to you.
3. Turn off feelings as much as possible and listen with an open mind.
4. Don't jump to conclusions until you have heard the child out.
5. Separate fact from inference.
6. Listen between the lines to hear what is not being said.
7. Learn to read nonverbal communication.
8. Pay attention to the feedback you provide.
    a. Nod
    b. Casual remark (I see, uh-huh)
    c. Echo
    d. Open questions
    e. Paraphrasing
    f. Perception check

When time permits small groups are given a topic to discuss and are required to use the Rogerian Technique in the discussion. Many parents, especially fathers in managerial positions, find this technique difficult! But

they do sometime realize, at that point, that they are more intent on presenting their own ideas than listening to the ideas and opinions of others. A good question for discussion in these groups is "How long are parents obligated to financially support their children?"

Responding techniques based on Carkhuff's research are also employed when time allows. The following interchanges may be used to illustrate the different levels of response:

Child: Mary said she won't be my best friend anymore.

Parent: Did you do your homework yet?

You know what, one of my best friends moved away.

Don't worry about it--I'm sure she'll change her mind tomorrow.

You like Mary so much. I know it hurts to think about it.

If the group is not too large and is interacting well, some role-playing may be employed to illustrate the varying levels of empathy. Some situations which may be employed are a child who is disappointed because a game has been cancelled, a child who has broken a favorite toy, a teenager who has just broken up with a steady, a child who has been caught lying, a child who doesn't want to eat a particular food, a child who has had a confrontation with one of the parents. When these situations are employed, the scene is described well and the participants are given names. They are instructed to adopt the non-verbal communication that each of the participants would use. Not all groups adapt

well to role-playing, and it is best to check with the group before undertaking this activity.

A "Listening Survey" patterned after Ralph Nichol's early one is used to help parents survey their own habits once those habits have been discussed. (appendix) This seems preferable to using the survey as an opener, because often parents don't realize their own habits until they have been confronted with them. This survey can also be used as a point of discussion with a small group if the need for a lecture is not indicated.

The information presented in this paper can be condensed to a 30 minute presentation which I have given for parent/teacher meetings or expanded to a 3-hour workshop for parents. It has even been presented as a portion of a 10-hour communication workshop developed for parents and teachers in one Louisiana school district. Suggestions can also be given about what parents can do to help their children learn to listen better.

Evaluations on this workshop consistenly range in the highest ranks with 80% to 90% of the participants giving it the highest score. Some of the comments I have received are as follows: "The enclosed evaluation compilation shows what a dynamic presentation you gave." (Director of Family Tree) "Thank you for helping our parents to communicate better with their children." (Coordinator, Allen Parish Health Unit) "This has been

a most enjoyable session and I feel I have learned so much." (parent) "I would really like to learn more." (parent) "Three hours well spent!" (parent) "This was an excellent reminder of the importance of listening skills and my role in carrying this responsibility." (parent/teacher) "This was the best workshop I have ever attended." (parent/teacher)

The workshops/presentations are always a source of satisfaction to me as the presenter. The reactions of parents is mostly one of "I never thought about that before." Often the "Ah-hah!" experience occurs, and parents will leave with great enthusiasm for putting newly found skills to use.

The Lafayette Parish School District, as well as other districts in the state, is becoming increasingly interested in teaching oral communication skills throughout the curriculum. As this interest expands there will be more numerous occasions to teach programs such as this one to both parents and teachers. When that climate develops, testing and follow-ups should be initiated to ascertain the effects that such parent/teacher training has on children's communication habits, on their academic achievement, and on their social development.

APPENDIX A

Directions: Below are listening behaviors which would encourage successful communication between a parent and child. Check yourself honestly on the following items. You are the only one who needs to see this and it is of little value if you fudge on the answers!

BEHAVIOR	Almost always	Usually	Occa-sionally	Seldom	Almost never
1. I pay attention.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
2. I look at my child.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
3. I keep an open mind.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
4. I don't get upset.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
5. I listen to the entire explanation.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
6. I don't jump to conclusions.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
7. I don't interrupt.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
8. I stay calm.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
9. I paraphrase.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
10. I give active feedback.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

Score yourself as follows:

Almost always	10
Usually	8
Occasionally	6
Seldom	4
Almost never	2

1. _____ 6. _____
2. _____ 7. _____
3. _____ 8. _____
4. _____ 9. _____
5. _____ 10. _____

Total_____

Interpret your total as follows:

Below 60 - Help! Help!
61-70 - Help!
71-80 - Pretty good!
81-90 - Pat on the back!
Above 90 - Gold star listener!

APPENDIX B

WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES: At the conclusion of this workshop parents should

1. Understand the communication process
2. Identify their poor listening habits
3. Understand how to correct poor habits
4. Be able to paraphrase
5. Be able to check perception
6. Be able to engage in empathic listening

WORKSHOP SCHEDULE

9:00-9:15	Introduction
9:15-9:35	The communication process
9:35-10:00	Listening habits
10:00-10:10	Break
10:10-10:40	Improving listening skills
10:40-11:00	Practice in paraphrasing and perception
11:00-11:30	Empathic listening
11:30-12:00	Role play

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